



CHANCELLOR'S NOTES

Chancellor Rhee's regular newsletter on learning, schools and system-wide reforms in DC Public Schools

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Aspiring to Greatness in Teaching: IMPACT and the Teaching and Learning Framework



As the Olympics end I am heartened by the energy of competition and Americans' collective drive to be the best. We don't have to follow speed skating or the luge year-round to root for our athletes, follow their stories or identify with the struggles they faced on the way to success.

With a [few new tools this year](#), DC teachers are working to become the best educators in their field, and there is nowhere it could be more important than in education.

As one DCPS teacher says, "It is teachers who will determine where our country goes, how the economy will be in the next 10 years. It is all contingent on how well we do our jobs ... If all of my kids decide not to go to college, what happens to social security? But if they all decide to become doctors, what does that say for medicine and the curing of diseases? Teaching is... the one profession that determines our future. Our future. Not just the kids, but everyone."

Being the Best in Teaching – What does it look like?

Who were your best teachers? What was it that made their lessons stick, and how would your life be different without them?

Mine was Mr. Lundholm, my high school English teacher. Though we complained at the smell of coffee that followed him everywhere, his command of the classroom and his respect for us earned our curiosity and desire to make him proud. Mr. Lundholm saw potential in me that I was too young to see in myself, and he saw something different in each of my classmates, somehow knowing exactly what we needed in order to shine.

What if we were to pool everyone's answers to this question together? Could we create one definitive but comprehensive standard of excellence for teachers to aspire to?

Is great teaching quantifiable, and can a school system foster it?

Defining and Measuring Good Teaching

It is an ambitious and complex process to quantify a skill that for decades has been dismissed as beyond our understanding. Yet we believe it is possible to outline the vision, goals and practices

of great teaching, and to support teachers in achieving it.



Teacher O'Kiyyah Lyons, 11th grade, 3 years
Columbia Heights Education Campus, Ward 1
Photo by Marie Pasquel

Even though there are common standards for excellence in almost every field, for years teachers have worked without them. Without a high bar set for what is expected, and without the professional development support to reach that bar, teachers have routinely been thrown into the most challenging of situations with little more than best wishes. It is enough to make anyone

burn out, and urban districts lose good teachers as a result.

To change this, we are coupling a new [Teaching and Learning Framework](#) that clarifies what we believe good teaching looks like, with [IMPACT](#), an assessment system in which principals and master educators—a position created by teacher request—observe and assess teacher practice and discuss it with teachers in a specific and thoughtful way.

But isn't teaching an art? How can you measure that?

A few weeks ago, a student on my youth cabinet shared that she believes teaching is more of an art than a science. She was hitting on the crux of a debate that occurs with any attempt to measure or define excellent teaching.

We believe teaching is both, and artists and scientists alike work to hone their skills by collaborating with other professionals, seeking mentorship from experts and relentlessly pursuing excellence in their crafts.

Teaching as a science: For example, one of the elements assessed in a classroom observation through [IMPACT](#) is the level at which a teacher engages individual students. Student achievement data can provide volumes of information about what each student needs, and teachers use research regarding methods of instruction that work best with different learning styles and cognitive stages. Teachers also use trial and error to perfect their teaching methods and the approaches that work best with every student.

In these ways teaching is a science in which data, research and assessment are critical tools to success.

Teaching as an art: However, in every instructional moment a great teacher also uses instinct to gauge where students are, and creativity to respond. For just one student, a teacher's approach may be different at different times, depending on unexpected challenges that a child brings to the classroom on any given day.

Teachers also have to quickly assess whether humor or a thoughtful conversation is the best way to move through an obstacle. They determine when to back off and when to push, building positive relationships with students to propel them forward. They balance pacing and tone, body language and volume, honing the craft of teaching over time.

Even the best teachers cannot do this perfectly every day, so multiple classroom observations are an important part of any assessment of teaching. But there is one very measurable thing that happens when teachers effectively balance this art and science of teaching: their students achieve.

This is why [IMPACT](#), the teacher assessment aligned to the [Teaching and Learning Framework](#), includes an objective measurement of student achievement. It does not ask for results according to an absolute measure of student performance, as this would not be fair to teachers whose students start out behind. Instead it includes the academic growth students achieve in the time spent with a teacher.

As we continue to improve the Framework and IMPACT, I am so proud of the many teachers in DC who are embracing the chance to become the best at what they do. When they achieve at the highest levels, Olympic gold medals will not be able to match the power of their impact on

the city, nation, and most importantly on the lives and achievements of the children who pass through their classrooms every year.

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